

54th Engineers ready for deployment, bid farewell

Soldiers set to leave for second Iraq tour

BY RICK EMERT

Stars and Stripes

BAMBERG, Germany — The 54th Engineer Battalion got an official farewell from the Warner Barracks community and added the Presidential Unit Citation streamer to its guidon during a deployment ceremony Friday.

The unit was recognized for its support of the 3rd Infantry Division in liberating Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom I from March 19 to May 1, 2003, according to the citation.

By the end of October, about 440 soldiers from the battalion will deploy as Task Force Dagger for a second rotation in Iraq. The unit will be based near Ramadi with three support companies including a Marine unit, said Lt. Col. Shawn McGinley, battalion commander.

"I think we're ready," McGinley said. "This will be a hard mission, but we've trained over the last year, and the rear detachment is ready to support the families."

That training has included a couple of rotations at Grafenwöhr and exercises at training areas in Kitzingen and Bamberg, said Maj. Hank Thomsen, operations officer for the battalion.

In remarks during the ceremony, Brig. Gen. Daniel A. Hahn, V Corps deputy commander, said



RICK EMERT/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers from 54th Engineer Battalion case the unit guidon during a deployment ceremony Friday in Bamberg, Germany. Some 440 members of the battalion will deploy to Iraq by the end of October. The battalion supported the 3rd Infantry Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom I from February to December 2003.

The soldiers in formation who had deployed to Iraq for OIF I helped change the lives of Iraqis.

"Because of your sacrifices, the people of Iraq now have hope for their future," he said.

He also assured the troops that their families would not be uprooted because of transformation of units and bases in Europe.

"We will not put your families through any unnecessary turmoil through rehearsing or transformation while you are deployed," he said.

The soldiers in the battalion said the extensive training has

made them confident about the deployment, but a year away from home will be hardship for some.

"The only hard thing is that I just got married in July, and we have had a hard time talking about the deployment," said Spc. Michael Johnson. "My wife [Deana] signed up for college classes and she wants to volunteer to keep busy. She's going to sign [daughter Eve, 9] up for some extra classes after school. The big thing is staying occupied to keep your mind off the deployment."

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DENNIS JOHNSON/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Command Sgt. Maj. Terry Defenbaugh, 54th Engineer Battalion, left, helps Brig. Gen. Daniel A. Hahn, V Corps deputy commander, place the Presidential Unit Citation on the 54th Engineers' guidon during the deployment ceremony Friday.

Brava! Vicenza educator named DODEA's best

Italian immersion teacher has a way of relating to her students

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — *L'insegnante migliore.*

That's what Patricia Salerno's fourth-grade students at Vicenza Elementary School could call their Italian immersion teacher — "the best teacher." And it would be hard to argue.

Salerno, who has been teaching in and out of the Department of Defense Education Activity school system for 35 years, was recently named DODEA's 2006 teacher of the year.

"I've never been speechless in my life, and I was speechless," Salerno said of learning the news from a telephone call with DODEA Director Joseph Tafolla.

Since then, congratulations have been pouring into her e-mail inbox from former colleagues around the globe. That's what happens, Salerno says, when you've spent the better part of the last four decades working at schools in various locations around the world.

Salerno, however, hasn't followed the same path of many of her colleagues. For the majority of her teaching career, she was a military spouse.

She followed her husband, Dennis, who retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel, from assignment to assignment. She's been at Vicenza for the last six years — but it's her third year teaching at the school.

She said the perspective she's gained as a military spouse and a civilian employee help her as a teacher and probably helped her win the honor.

"My husband was deployed five times," she said. So she knows what pupils and parents are going through, she said.

In her present class of 24, half have parents deployed downrange. She said she and other teachers throughout the system have had to take such factors into account. She discovered one child had a parent home recently for rest-and-relaxation leave. A test was scheduled on the day that Dad was heading back downrange.

"You can't give that child a test the day Dad's leaving," she said, saying the student would be thinking about things other than school work. "You just can't."

Salerno has been an Italian immersion teacher during this stint at Vicenza, following five years in a similar position in Naples. Much of the instruction in her classroom is in Italian.

"We do a lot of singing in Italian and we do the chicken dance in Italian," she said. Interestingly enough, Salerno hasn't had much formal education in Italian herself. Her husband, who currently has a NATO job in Verona, is Italian-American and holds an advanced degree in Italian literature. She said she's picked up her fluency by spending years talking with his relatives in Italy.

The immersion system is a popular one at Vicenza and has a waiting list. One teacher at each of the first four grades participates.

Principal Alice Herring said several parents nominated Salerno for the honor. She first was recognized as Mediterranean District teacher of the year, then competed against the winners from other districts around the globe.

"She's very talented and very sharing," Herring said.

Salerno now will take part in several events in the States in the coming months and will be honored along with the winners from the 50 states in a ceremony in January.

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Patricia Salerno
DODEA teacher of the year,
Vicenza Elementary School